DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 060 FL 012 256

AUTHOR Johns, Ann M.
TITLE Preventing Global Discourse Errors: Problems and Approaches to ESOL Writing.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 7p.; In its CATESOL Occasional Papers, Number 6, p65-70, Fall 1980.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Connected Discourse; *Discourse Analysis; *English (Second Language); *Error Analysis (Language); Language Patterns; *Paragraph Composition; Paragraphs; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education; *Student Writing Models; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Cohesion (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

The teaching of discourse features which affect the relations among sentences in a paragraph has often been delayed until students are considered advanced. Yet, because control of such features is considered essential to gaining control of language segments, instruction in these features should be given from the beginning. One category of discourse features, cohesion, is considered and five cohesive elements are identified. Examples of errors found in a corpus of 356 paragraphs written by college-level speakers of other languages are discussed in terms of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Two steps are considered which teachers of students at all proficiency levels can take to insure better understanding of cohesion. First, models of discourse can be used to study connective ties, and student compositions can be corrected only for cohesion errors. Secondly, students might be provided with an example of discourse to be read and examined in terms of several cohesion-related questions. A number of such questions are suggested. Finally, it is suggested that English as a Second Language texts might be used to emphasize discourse rather than concentrating on the sentence. (AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED200060

California Association - Teachers of
English to Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 6 (Fall, 1980)

PREVENTING GLOBAL DISCOURSE ERRORS: PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES TO ESOL WRITING

Ann M. Johns
American Language Institute
San Diego State University

Because many ESOL instructors have concentrated upon the teaching of sentence-level elements, the teaching of discourse features which affect the relations among sentences in a paragraph has often been ignored or delayed until students are considered advanced. However, because control of these elements is central to the control of the language segments (e.g., paragraphs)[1] in which we speak and write, the teaching of the appropriate use of these global features should be included in instruction from the beginning level.[2]

This paper will focus upon one category of discourse features, cohesion, and will discuss examples of errors found principally in a corpus of 356 paragraphs written by college-level speakers of Japanese, Vietnamese, Spanish, Farsi and Arabic. These mistakes will be classified according to the scheme presented in Halliday and Hasan, who identify five cohesive element types: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.[3] Suggestions will be made for preventing these errors through classroom practice.

REFERENCE

Common reference errors include inappropriate use of pronoun referents (he, she, it), of the definite article (the) or demonstratives (this, these). An example of misuse of a pronoun referent is the following:

Example 1: In the picture, I see a woman with a man, another man eating his food and a waiter. He is bending down. (Provided by Raimes.)[4]

In Example 1, he could refer to one of the two men or the waiter, all mentioned in the first sentence.

The demonstrative this is very important to written English, for it is a reference item which can be generalized to a number of sentences and yet indicates a proximity to the topic of the paragraph which the definite article the does not require. Example 2 is one of several in the corpus in which a student substituted the for this:

Example 2: During the past 30 years, many ships and airplanes have disappeared in the area. They vanished without any reason. Investigators couldn't find anything out about these strange disappearing ships and airplanes. The strange phenomenon which can't be explained exists in the modern world.

FL 012 256

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Gilmore, Editor
CATESOL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SUBSTITUTION AND ELLIPSIS

Errors from Halliday and Hasan's substitution and ellipsis categories are rare, because employment of these cohesive features, even in native speaker writing, is rare.[5] Substitution, similar to reference, consists of the replacement of one of a small group of words (e.g., one, some) for a noun or phrase which appears in an earlier sentence (e.g., He gave us several assignments. I didn't like this one). Ellipsis, as the term indicates, is the omission of words which have appeared in earlier sentences, because they are unnecessary for reader comprehension. It is in ellipsis where the few examples of these error types were found, usually when students repeated phrases which are unnecessary for comprehension.

Example 3: Some students work very hard. Others don't work very hard. I work very hard.

CONJUNCTION

Mistakes in the use of conjunctions are the most common in the corpus studied. Within this category, frequent errors involve those elements which students probably learn first, the coordinates, and and but. Arabic speakers and, to a lesser extent, Farsi speakers are especially prone to employment of and or but in contexts where more complex elements would be more appropriate.[6] Example 4 appeared in a controlled composition exercise, completed by an Arabic speaker, in which the transition word was to be supplied:

Example 4: Even adults have moved once during their adulthood. And many Americans have boxes that toasters, clocks, etc. have come in so that they can move easily.

The meaning of and is additive, to complete or to unite a point to what has been previously discussed. In Example 4, adults no doubt keep the boxes because they move frequently. Therefore, rather than completing the idea, the second sentence results from the first one. A number of complex conjunctions which show result (e.g., thus, therefore) would be more appropriate in this context.

On the other hand appears frequently in the written work examined. This element introduces a point which is in direct contrast to sentences which immediately precede it. In Example 5, the contrast has already been supplied. The comment following on the other hand could be better understood if an additive conjunction, such as and were employed:

Example 5: It [the stock market] will increase. But a savings account has a constant profit so I can't get much advantage from it. On the other hand, the stocks become more active than the savings account.

Conjunctions which signal examples (e.g., for instance) require a sentence following them which provides a specific example of what has been mentioned in previous sentences. This constraint is not met in Example 6, where an example of cultural transmission by word, painting or picture is necessary.

Example 6: Culture is transmitted from old generation by word, painting, picture and others. For example, the parents who live in differ-

ent countries teach their children in different ways.

LEXICAL COHESION

Although lexical cohesion appears most frequently in the corpus studied, mistakes in the use of lexical items which signal ties between sentences did not appear as often as in the use of conjunctions or reference items. Of those that did appear, the most common were in repetition of words when a referent would have been more appropriate:

Example 7: A mother is very important to the family. The mother does the cooking. And the mother is often helping the father. The mother . . .

The errors in the four categories cited here, reference, ellipsis and substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion are a few of the types which appear in the writing of ESOL students. These mistakes are global, for they cross sentences and, especially in the case of conjunctions, can disrupt the thread of connected discourse.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

A number of steps can be taken by instructors of students at all proficiency levels to insure the better understanding of cohesion.

First, some written work can be corrected only for discourse-level errors, such as those in cohesion. After marking those errors, the instructor can determine, with the help of the student, why these errors were made. Reasons may include student insecurity about cohesive element meaning, insufficient instruction or practice provided in class, or confusion of an element with a similar one in the student's own language.[7] Once the reason for the error is determined, correction can become a more constructive, learning process.

Some mistakes in the use of cohesive items can be prevented if teaching and practice are well and thoroughly accomplished. This cannot be done if instructors, or texts, present entire classes of cohesive items (e.g., but, yet, however, on the other hand) together. When this happens, students often conclude that all the items taught together may be employed interchangeably in a number of contexts. Since this is not always the case, an exercise, adapted from McKay,[8] can be introduced: in a number of paragraph contexts, examples of different items in a category (e.g., additives) are presented. After examples are compared, students practice varied uses of the items in cloze exercises within new sample paragraphs.[9]

Virginia French Allen[10] speaks of the "grammar of expectancy," referring to the learner's ability to guess what comes next in connected discourse. ESOL or English-speaker writing can be used to teach this grammar, thereby also teaching the meanings and uses of cohesive elements. For example, a student can be given Example 6, above, with the sentence following the conjunction for example deleted. S/he can then provide the appropriate sentence or group of sentences to complete the paragraph.

Models of discourse can be used in other ways as well. The prose of textbooks can be studied for a count of the number and types of cohesive ties among sentences. In this way, students discover that there may be a number

of ties from different categories (e.g., reference, conjunction, lexical cohesion) in each sentence.

Another successful method for drawing a student's attention to cohesive elements is to provide an example of discourse s/he might read and ask questions such as the ones provided here:

1) The objective of the engineering program at San Diego State University is to provide the intellectual and physical environment to encourage students to develop their capacities toward a successful career in the profession of engineering.

2) The graduate of this program is able to assume personal responsibility for the development and application of engineering knowledge with wisdom and judgment for the benefit of mankind.

3) S/he is qualified to take the Engineer-in-Training examination as a first step to professional registration, to enter industry at the junior engineer level, or to continue his or her formal education at the graduate level.

4) Because the engineer's work is predominantly intellectual and varied, and not of a routine mental or physical character, this program places emphasis on the mastery of a strong core of subject matter in the physical sciences, mathematics, and the engineering sciences of broad applicability.

5) Woven throughout the pattern is a continuing study of the socio-humanistic facets of our civilization, because the engineering graduate must expect to find his or her best expression as a leader, conscious of the social and economic implications of his or her decisions.

6) Although the profession of engineering presents in practice a variety of specialties, the undergraduate student initially focuses his or her attention on a pattern of course work emphasizing engineering fundamentals.

7) The student then is able to utilize this knowledge of fundamentals in developing special knowledge in his or her area of specific interest.[11]

1. Why is the acceptable in sentences 1 and 2 when the noun which follows has not been mentioned in an earlier sentence?

2. To what does this program refer in sentences 2 and 4?

3. To whom does s/he refer in sentence 3?

4. To what does the pattern refer in sentence 5?

5. What words are repeated throughout the reading? Why?

6. Why does then appear in sentence 7?

Finally, because the coordinates (and and but) are often overtaught as sentence-level items, perhaps they should receive less emphasis in discourse-oriented writing programs. Since they lead to neither sentence-level syntactic maturity[12] nor act as universally appropriate inter-sentence conjunctions, student reliance upon them can inhibit writing improvement.

People speak and write in sentence groups (paragraphs) rather than in individual sentences. Yet many ESOL texts--even writing texts--continue to emphasize the grammar of the sentence. A more careful look at discourse-level mistakes and methods for preventing them seems to be in order.

NOTES

[1]"Paragraph" in this paper will refer to the "conceptual paragraph," one which discusses a single topic but may be physically indented several times. See Louis Trimble, "An Approach to Reading Scientific and Technical English," in Languages for Special Purposes (Vol. 4) (Mexico City: Universidad Autononia Metropolitana, 1974).

[2]The term "global" is taken from M. Burt and C. Kiparsky, "Global and Local Mistakes," in New Features in Second Language Learning, ed. John Schumann and Nancy Stenson (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1974), pp. 71-79.

[3]M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, Cohesion in English (London: Longman, 1976).

[4]A. Raimes, "A Grammar for Composition, A Grammar for Cohesion," paper presented at the Thirteenth Annual TESOL Convention, Boston, 1979.

[5]See A. M. Johns, "A Comparison of Cohesive Elements in American Business and Non-Native Speaker Written Discourse," Diss. Univ. of Southern California, 1979.

[6]See Johns, "Comparison of Cohesive Elements."

[7]See, for example, S. P. Corder, "Idiosyncratic Dialects and Error Analysis," International Review of Applied Linguistics, 9 (1971).

[8]S. McKay, "Teaching the Semantic and Pragmatic Dimensions of Verbs," TESOL Quarterly, 14, No. 1 (1980).

[9]Two comprehensive sources for the semantics of conjunctions are Halliday and Hasan and S. Greenbaum, Studies in English Adverbial Usage: Miami Linguistics Series (5) (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969).

[10]V. F. Allen, "Trends in the Teaching of Reading," TESL Register, 6 (1973).

[11]Adapted from the San Diego State University Catalogue, 1980-81, p.246.

[12]Complex sentences are characteristic of a mature English style. See, e.g., D. A. Daiker, A. Kerek, and M. Morenberg, "Sentence Combining and

Syntactic Maturity in Freshman English," College Composition and Communication, 29 (1978).